

Local Officials are trying to Make Sure Weather Emergencies Don't Stop the Region in its Tracks Again. By Mike Conneen. TBD News/News Channel 8. 11/9/2011

The Council of Governments is calling for a regional incident coordination program under the D.C. Department of Homeland Security.

“If these recommendations are implemented in a timely manner and the public follows the information well... yes I do think it will avoid that massive gridlock,” said Phil Andrews, a Democrat on the Montgomery County Council.

The body would collect information from agencies across the region.

“It's not a decision making body. It's an information gathering body and information sharing body,” explains Millicent West of the department.

Some board members question whether the proposal adequately addresses the original problem: coordinating regional decision-making.

“When you have a fire, with multiple fire departments responding, there's one and only one chief. The decision is made. The incident is handled. The failure to have that in the region, I believe has led to serious problems in the past and will in the future,” said David Snyder, Democratic vice-mayor of Falls Church.

The leaders want more regional training exercises and are calling for backup power at all major traffic signals.

“If we don't have backup power to major traffic signals we will have gridlock even if we do all the other things right,” said Andrews.

The group is urging employers to develop new early dismissal and shelter-in-place policies to avoid gridlock akin to the nightmarish commute following the Jan. 26 snowstorm.

“We might tell people you can leave two hours earlier than you normally would, make sure you leave by 3 o'clock to make sure you get home before the storm reaches a critical mass, and if you haven't left by 3 o'clock plan on staying a few hours on a temporary basis,” Dean Hunter said of the policy at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

If the federal government and local jurisdictions send employees home early and there's no snow or not enough snow to justify doing so – who will shoulder the blame?

“It's better to be safe than sorry given the consequences,” Andrews said.